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Reading ‘Reading Capital’*

WITHIN THE WORLD OF MARXIST THEORY western Marxism has developed in richness and responsiveness to reality to the very extent that it has disengaged itself from the scholastification and dogmatization of Marx's thought by the Soviet diamat.1 But at this moment there has emerged within western Marxism itself, an interpretation of Marx which shows no intense theoretical quarrel with the diamat but rather turns against the whole of western Marxism within which it was nurtured, an interpretation of Marxism as a 'science', an interpretation which summons up the whole nexus of dogmatics associated with the centrality of Das Kapital, economic determinism, antihumanism, and dialectical materialism as Marxist philosophy. Do we have in this interpretation whose centre is Louis Althusser, dogmatism returned in disguise inveighing against western Marxism’s non-scientificity, Hegelianism and humanism, a dogmatism that argues for Marxist ‘science’ from the standpoint of Marxist ‘science’?

To be sure this circularity is the difficulty encountered in reading Althusser: he argues from the standpoint that is to be argued and is it any wonder then that his nominated adversaries crumble in the face of his arguments? Their conceptual complex which views

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1 By western Marxism we mean those schools born out of Lukacs’ What is Orthodox Marxism? Theoretically it inaugurates a disengagement of Engels’ dialectics of nature from Marx’s work proper.


* We say READING Reading Capital and not REVIEW of Reading Capital because it is the reviewer's opinion that the book is too important to be 'reviewed', because for the reader that is to prejudge it. It has to be READ in the reviewer's opinion, and in this article he says why he thinks so.

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Marxism as a theory of freedom, as the realisation of Reason, as the critique of alienation; a self-admitted non-scientific complex was born in the very struggle of freeing Marxism from its scientistic interpretation. For western Marxism scientism is positivism incarnate and its whole critique was a critique of positivism! Marx himself provides the framework with which to understand positivism whatever its form as ideology and with this the ideological function of science itself could be demonstrated. This was transparent in the case of Soviet Marxist science. Theoretical truth (non-ideology) could only be established through a retreat from ideology (scientific or otherwise) into anti-positivism, that is in the suppressed tradition of Western critical philosophy itself. It was easy then to see how Marxism inherited this tradition and how it could be turned against the ideological dogmatics of the diamat. Theoretical emancipation from ideology occurred in critical (philosophical-social) theory.

Perhaps it is this very retreat that has persuaded western Marxists to bypass or overlook recent developments in the philosophy and historiography of science. These developments have produced an understanding of the phenomenon of scientificity that renders the anti-positivist critique of science obsolete to the extent that the critique was only a critique of the positivist self-conception of science, a conception obsessed with methodology and principles of verification (and falsification). Science had been taken at its empirical word, its positivistic mode of conceptualisation brutalised reality into conformity with its a priori conceptualisation (that is, it identified it operationally and expressed its quantitatively) and failed to disclose it in its rich and contradictory character. Science was anti-dialectical, and ignored its social-transcendental interest in controlling and dominating nature and thereby man, from the standpoint of Marxist critical theory.

But Althusser does not revive an old feud for this time both the positivist self-conception of science and Marxism as critical theory are ideological, that is Althusser's argument is not conducted from the standpoint of positivist Marxist scientism (though it would seem to have a spiritual affinity with it) but from the standpoint of the recent non-positivist conception of scientificity, a standpoint that western Marxism has not hitherto confronted. But unlike Marcuse who has the unique privilege of having been attacked from both (or all) sides, Althusser is gaining a considerable and disciplined following within the west itself and this becomes

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2 The most readily accessible exposition of this view is contained in Herbert Marcuse *One Dimensional Man*. Chapter 6. It is a theme strongly argued by the Frankfurt school.
baffling when his standpoint can easily be mistaken for an old one. Could this following be a new rush of dogmatism and scholastification? Is it instead a new plunder of Marx’s thought for a ‘structuralist sociology’? (We all know that plunderings by positive sociology and their subsequent distortions of Marx’s thought has been the subject of prodigious attack by western Marxists.) But neither is the case.

For the impact of Althusser is located precisely in his conception of science (or scientificity if we would still confuse it with the positivist self-conception). It would be easy to discredit Althusser for his apparent failure to define what he means by ‘science’ and for failing to give a definite distinction between science and ideology, for these are indeed the fundamental concepts of Althusser’s whole work. However, a concerted study of Althusser will show this distinction to be well founded and precise given the complexity and originality of the conception of science being forged — a conception of science that submits to no discrete definition and which is in principle anti-empirical! But to establish this apparent paradox as in fact theoretically adequate is none other than to understand Althusser. We come to see how Marxism is a science because we have established the true character of scientificity itself. For Althusser Marxism is a science in a way that the anti-positivist critique has never been able to disclose in spite of its apparently thorough critique of science.

So for a start Althusser’s Marxist science is not a new social science (as a ‘structuralist sociology’) more adequate to the professed principles of social science (in the way that the plunder of such Marxist concepts as ‘class’, ‘alienation’ and ‘reification’ was thought to make it more adequate). Dialectical materialism is its name (but not the dialectical materialist conception of society and nature as founded by Engels and inscribed in the diamat), rather it is properly understood as Marx’s theory of theory or meta-theory, Marxist philosophy in the narrow sense. But, Althusser argues, it was never properly formulated by Marx himself but rather operates in a ‘practical state’ in Marx’s definitive work, Capital, and as Lacan gave psychoanalysis its proper theoretical formulation which Freud could not do. Althusser takes it upon himself to articulate for Marx his theory, to bring it out of its practical state into theoretical consciousness. And he shows that the theory Marx worked with was never a methodology in an explicit sense but rather a conception of scientificity appropriate to its object. Additional to raising to theoretical consciousness Marx’s own theory

and coincidental with it, Althusser for the first time elevates to conceptual form what the object of Marx’s theory was. This is the whole difficulty we have in reading Capital, that a double discovery was made, the discovery of a new object for theory and a new conception of scientificity while neither was properly conceptualised or given conscious theoretical form. Althusser disengages and then reestablishes what he calls the ‘discourse-object unity’ of Capital and shows that it is necessary to do so if we are to read Capital rather than read into Capital philosophical conceptions that derive elsewhere, specifically from the Young Marx.

Perhaps it would be a circular argument from the standpoint of western Marxism however if the conception of science that Marx worked in was not fundamentally compatible with the recent non-positivist critique of the positivist self-conception of science being produced. Althusser indicates to this critique — “look into Capital, there it is already, ahead of its time!” Of course it was always there in all the great founding moments of science, in Galileo, Lavosier and so on, but the positivist self-conception could not see it. For the latter Galileo and Lavosier were scientists but not Marx — and here western Marxists would agree — but for opposite reasons. Marx must now join Galileo and Lavosier because, despite the uniqueness of the object of his science (being non-natural) his approach was scientifically adequate to his object. The positivist self-conception of science has as it were, confused science with the study of a particular type of object (the natural) and has always thought of scientificity in terms of the naturalness of its object, that is, it confuses science with its practice on a particular type of object. Of course social science adopts the methods of the positivist conception and applies them to a fundamentally different object, but methods appropriate only to a particular type of object (the natural). Small wonder that the anti-positivist critique of social science as the reduction of the human world to the form of the natural-quantitative, is so successful.

We can insist that it is the very character of scientificity that in its epistemological source the possible questions it asks of its object be open in principle and not intimidated by guarantees (as inferred by some formalised Subject/Object relation) as to the form of its answers; that only then does it establish its methods and criteria of apodicticity and proof appropriate to the level at which the questions are asked. Compare the positivist conception which identifies science firstly with its method which demands that questions be formulated appropriate to the method and not the object. Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions which is at the centre of the new developments in the historiography of

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science in the English-speaking world, shows that scientific revolu-
tions are founded on intuition and intelligence and not on the
application of pre-ordained scientific methods such that if we
identify science only as what he calls ‘normal’ or established science,
we cannot understand revolutionary discovery in the history of
science. As Althusser shows too, scientific discovery arrives rather
as a surprise than as the goal of scientific reasoning. It is
established reasoning that does not permit the asking of ‘open’
questions, that is, it does not permit scientific discovery except
in the form of ‘puzzle solving’ for which guarantees are already
set up. A new conception of reality may produce questions which
rest latent for centuries (as Aristarchus founded long before
Copernicus) but its questions become scientific not when a method is
provided but when a theory as a theory of its object is produced.
Science is not born when a new question is asked but only when a
theory of its object is produced, only then can we say a new object is
discovered as a new object, when it is given theoretical form (or
as Kuhn would say, a paradigm). The asking of an open question
only becomes a scientific discovery when a theory of its object
is produced and only then do principles of proof and apodicticity
(i.e., method) follow appropriate to that theory (as phlogiston theory
was not the theory with which Priestley could ask questions of
de-phlogisticated air). This often means that such a radical
revision of the previous theory (or paradigm) that in fact a new
theory takes its place, a rupture so deep that even new episte-
mological principles must be worked out.

On insisting that such a rupture took place in Marx against
his Early Works as well as Classical Political Economy, Althusser
is justified in regarding the Early Works as ideological and not
scientific precisely because he thought in an empirical idealist
theory (or problematic) which epistemologically set up guarantees
for the questions he asked. To discover the cornerstone of the
objects of his science, surplus value, Marx had to produce a
theory of the concept of his object which the anthropological
framework of both the Early Works and of Classical Political
Economy could not provide him. An epistemology which insists
that it disclose man’s self-formative processes would both guarantee
an answer and fail to discover surplus value.

If then a science, what of the relation of theory to practice?
The theoretical solution of, say, Lukacs, and the theoretical non-
solution of Marcuse cease to be relevant. Althusser insists that
Marx’s theory is practical because it is true, not that it is true
because it has succeeded in practice. When Marcuse claims that

6 Reading Capital, p. 59.
theory preserves the truth, though practice may deviate from its proper path, he is referring to what seems to be an established 'truth' which leaves the theoretician only to speculate on what has become of the 'proper path'. This may deem Marxism as a critical social theory but not as a science, a practical science in a similar way to which natural science is practical (that is, not because we can find a use for its discoveries but because it approaches its object in a practical way and not as it ought to be). Science tells us what its object is and not what it ought to be. Natural science becomes ideological when it is no longer practical in this sense, when it seeks guarantees for what its results ought to be. A theory which examines society from the standpoint of its socialist ought-to-be and goal (western Marxism and Soviet scientism respectively) is not scientific regardless of its methods because its questions are not open. So theory and practice remain categorically different and mutually irreducible. There is no unification on the side of practice for that would destroy the possibility of science and no unification on the side of theory for that would be to renounce politics, there can only be a genuine unification in the individual. This is how Marxism is a revolutionary theory but only its scientificity can make it a theory of revolution. The latter does not produce an impatient unification because it recognises the specificity of revolutionary practice.

Perhaps it is at this point that we find Althusser lacking. His analysis of the production of knowledge correctly allocates for such processes as intuition an original place in the processes of knowing, as the irreducible elements of scientific discovery. But he speaks only of the individual Marx midst the raw materials of his productions. Kuhn saw the need to postscript his second edition on this very point, but integral to understanding both scientific discovery and the practice of normal science, the social context must be included as contributory, that is, science is only practised in a scientific community. For us, what community would practise Marxist science, the bourgeois establishment? Althusser would doubtless answer with the Party and that would leave interest in the science to some pre-scientific political commitment. But other than that Althusser has not established the contextual factors which define the epistemological sphere which establishes intuition as rigorous to the practice of its science and not as mere guesswork or wishful thinking. It is in a community that any science its practised and not through adherence to theoretical principles alone. It is easy to see in the natural sciences though their communities are more homogenous and esoteric, that the community confirms the practice once a science is founded, it provides both a definition.

of its knowledge and gives intuition, etc., its pre-epistemological direction. The only guarantee that bourgeois social science could not take up Marxist science willy nilly lies in the community which provides the basis of practical judgement about the raw materials of its knowledge.

But this is not to assert that a certain 'interest' guides knowledge other than the interest of scientificity itself, that asking of open questions which alone lead to scientific knowledge. But then do we forsake the critical-emancipatory character of Marx's theory for cold science? We could defend Althusser by saying these omissions of the 'spirit' of Marxism are returned at the level of Party membership where they return mediately in the spirit of the community that practises the science while it does not exist immediately in the theory.

But this is needless because we can go straight to the spirit of Althusser's Marxism in the science itself. Through science itself there is always a nexus of (scientific) knowledge and revolution for the object of Marxist science in its real existence contains within itself the potential for revolution. That is, bourgeois social science need not be internally governed by an interest for social control but rather its epistemological principles foreclose it from knowing its object because it has no proper theory of its object. The world (whether social or natural) cannot be submitted to determined change unless it is scientifically known. The inescapable problem of determined judgment, of decision, can be exercised only from knowing what one judges and decides to act upon. What could be less dogmatic and less scholastic?